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Sov. Brigade

The Brigade's My Fault

By McGeorge Bundy

As I have learned more about the Soviet brigade in Cuba and heard alarm expressed over some unprecedented and novel violation of the Monroe Doctrine, it has slowly come home to me that this whole noncrisis is my fault.

Just 17 years ago this week, while I was the national security assistant at the White House, we had a real crisis over Soviet activity in Cuba. It had to do with nuclear missiles. The missiles were taken out, and a bit later the Russians also removed some light bombers that could have carried nuclear weapons over the United States. Moscow gave assurances that it would keep such weapons — we called them "offensive" — out of Cuba, and we gave assurances against any invasion. "Offensive" was clearly understood to mean "nuclear-capable." A similar understanding of what did and did not matter governed the resolution of a later Soviet attempt to establish a facility for nuclear-capable submarines. The small fuss over MIG-23's last year was resolved on the same basis.

As part of the missile buildup, the Russians placed a number of ground-force units in Cuba. At the time, we estimated total Soviet troop strength at 22,000; Fidel Castro has said lately that it was 40,000; for all I know he is right. We thought the units ought to go home — after all, there were no missiles left to guard. Once or twice we even called them "unacceptable." Most of them did leave, but we neither required nor got a pledge that all would go. In due course, the intelligence community decided that only a few small training units were left, and we happily accepted this judgment.

The truth is that we did not think small numbers of Soviet ground forces in Cuba were a serious matter. We did not see how they could threaten our country or any other in the hemisphere. The continuing Soviet presence did make good copy for speeches about our softness from Richard M. Nixon and Nelson Rockefeller, so it was a bore. The remaining units did illuminate Fidel Castro's embarrassing dependence on Moscow, but that only made them an asset in demonstrating that dependence (as they still are). We stopped worrying about them.

When the White House stops worrying about a problem, there is a natural tendency for the intelligence community to relax a little, too. Ideally, of course, the Central Intelligence Agency and its sister agencies would maintain total vigilance at all times everywhere. But in fact, like other people, the intelligence community usually has more on its plate than it can handle. Only the important problems get top-flight attention, and in the nature of things the definition of what is important usually comes from "higher authority."

So it was the fault of the Administration, not of the intelligence community, that the size and functions of the few thousands of ground troops left in Cuba by 1963 or 1964 ceased to be a priority problem. Even in retrospect, I cannot make this matter authoritatively Presidential in size, so I have to conclude that there was a staff failure — which means mostly me.

As new political attention was given to this problem last summer, the intelligence community renewed its own close attention, and pretty soon it found the famous brigade, a unit of about 2,600 men. Understandably, the first reaction in Washington — and still more in Idaho — was that something new and startling had happened. More recently the President, quite rightly, has cooled things down, but some fever seems to persist elsewhere. Meanwhile, the excellent professionals of the community have been doing their best to see where the brigade came from and how long it has been there. They touch hypersensitive nerves when they suggest that it might have arrived while a later assistant was serving other Presidents, so it seems only decent to confess my own belief that the real trouble began still earlier.

The odds are very strong that there were some Soviet ground-force units in Cuba — training or combat — all the way through. No doubt the numbers went down and up, and apparently at some point the units were organized into a small brigade, with a colonel in command. The equipment, or some of it, was probably modernized, and I don't find it hard to believe that these units have stopped training Cubans. My bet, indeed, is that the Cubans today are often better trained than the Russians; certainly they have more battlefield experience. And as far as I can tell, the only thing that distinguishes a so-called combat force from a so-called training force is that the former trains only itself.

So it is all our fault, mine and my staff's. The only question that remains is whether, just possibly, we were responding sensibly to a correct command judgment shared by both of the Presidents of our time.

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